United Nations A/C.5/53/SR.12

General Assembly
Fifty-third session

Official Records

Distr.: General
06 November 1998

Original: English

Fifth Committee

Summary record of the 12th meeting
Held at Headquarters, New York, on Friday, 23 October 1998, at 10 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. Armitage (Vice-Chairman) ..... (Australia)
later: Mr. Abelian (Chairman) ..... (Armenia)
Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administration and Budgetary Questions: Mr. Mselle

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98-81856 (E)

In the absence of Mr. Abelian (Armenia), Mr. Armitage (Australia), Vice-Chairman, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 10 a.m.

Agenda item 117: Pattern of conferences (*continued*) (A/51/946; A/52/7, A/52/685, A/52/803 and A/52/1000; A/53/16, A/53/32, A/53/221, A/53/257 and A/53/507)

1. **Mr. Atiyanto** (Indonesia), speaking on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, noted with satisfaction from the report of the Committee on Conferences (A/53/32) that the utilization of conference services in New York had exceeded the benchmark of 80 per cent and that similar improvements had been made at Geneva and Vienna. They also welcomed the inclusion of statistics for Nairobi for the first time. However, the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences should continue his consultations with the chairmen of the bodies performing below the benchmark with a view to improving their utilization of conference resources. The fact that 81 per cent of the requests for interpretation services for meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States had been met was welcome, but the Secretariat should make every effort to meet such requests in full.

2. The Group of 77 and China endorsed the request of the Committee on Conferences that the Secretariat should provide preliminary estimates of the cost of establishing a permanent cost-accounting system for conference services, together with a time-frame for the project (A/53/32, para. 42). They agreed with the statement in paragraph 10 of the report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ) on interpretation and translation issues (A/53/507) that the Secretary-General's report on the subject (A/53/257) did not provide sufficient information to allow for endorsement of the full-fledged development of such a system. As recommended by the Committee on Conferences, the Secretary-General should address the weaknesses outlined in the report of ACABQ and resubmit his proposals to the Fifth Committee. The consultative mechanism recommended in paragraph 38 of the report of the Committee on Conferences should be established.

3. The Group of 77 and China urged the Secretariat to make every effort to improve the utilization rate of conference facilities at Nairobi even further, in accordance with the appeal to Member States, intergovernmental and regional bodies and other major groupings contained in paragraph 51 of the report of the Committee on Conferences to consider increasing their use of the conference facilities at Nairobi.

4. It was to be hoped that the new structure of conference services would facilitate more effective coordination among the four main conference-servicing centres. The efforts to introduce new technologies were noted, but the use of remote interpretation must initially be confined to international conferences before being introduced in the United Nations system. The excessive vacancy rate in language services at all duty stations was a source of concern, and the Group of 77 and China noted the Secretariat's statement, referred to in paragraph 62 of the report, that no further budget reductions could be borne by conference services. They attached great importance to career development in the language services and endorsed the recommendation in paragraph 5 of the report of ACABQ (A/53/507) that the Secretary-General should prepare a special report analysing problems in that area. It also concurred with the Advisory Committee's view that the numbers and grade levels of staff should be commensurate with the Organization's needs.

5. The Group of 77 and China noted with concern that the provisions of paragraphs 24 and 25 of resolution 52/214 B, concerning the format of documents and reports, were not being fully implemented and they would welcome an explanation from the Secretariat as to the reasons for that situation. They were deeply concerned about the chronic problem of the late issuance of documents and reiterated that the Secretariat must comply with the six-week rule. They noted the establishment of a system of focal points to monitor documentation (A/53/32, para. 78), stressed the need to strengthen the Distribution Section and urged that the problem of the poor quality of some documents should be addressed by the Secretariat. Particular causes of concern were the suspension of some publications in all official languages and the continued high rates of self-revision. The Secretariat must endeavour to ensure timely delivery of documents in all six official languages.

6. The Group of 77 and China concurred with the recommendations made by the Committee for Programme and Coordination (CPC) in its report (A/53/16, paras. 347 to 352) with respect to the report of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) on United Nations publications (A/51/946). They appreciated the Secretariat's efforts to develop electronic means of delivering documents, such as the optical disk system, but the technological improvements must not compromise the Organization's commitment to serve the Member States in an equitable manner, with the emphasis on traditional hard-copy documents, nor should they be used as a means of shifting the cost of document production to Member States. The Secretary-General should issue public information material in all six official languages on the

United Nations Web site, as requested in paragraphs 2 and 3 of resolution 52/214 C; information from the Secretariat on the implementation of those provisions would be welcome.

7. In conclusion, he expressed appreciation to the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services for its support during the 22nd annual Ministerial Meeting of the Group of 77 and China, held in New York on 25 September.

8. **Ms. Cardoze** (Panama), speaking on behalf of the Rio Group, said it was a matter of satisfaction that 81 per cent of requests for conference services for meetings of regional and other major groupings had been met; efforts should be intensified to meet a higher proportion of such requests. The Rio Group was fully aware that it was the responsibility of States and regional groups to make effective use of the services provided.

9. The late issuance of documents remained a source of profound concern, especially as the number of meetings had been declining since 1994 and in the light of the information from the Secretariat that its annual document handling capacity was sufficient. Flexibility was, of course, needed when documents were requested at short notice, but otherwise the six-week rule must be strictly observed. The Group was also worried about the excessive volume of self-revision, a practice that was often responsible for mistakes in translation which sometimes involved additional costs when a document had to be reissued. It therefore fully supported the recommendation in paragraph 115 of the report of the Committee on Conferences (A/53/32), that the budget proposals for conference services for the next biennium should be prepared on the basis of actual anticipated requirements, taking into account both anticipated productivity gains and the need for improvements in the delivery of services. A cost-accounting system was particularly suitable for conference services, for it would facilitate decisions on the total and indicative costs of the services. It was regrettable that progress had not been made with the introduction of such a system and that the Secretary-General's report on the subject (A/53/257) did not contain sufficient information.

10. The Rio Group was grateful for the demonstration of video conferencing by members of conference services in Geneva, Nairobi and Vienna. The experiment had demonstrated the Organization's efforts to introduce new technology and should be repeated in 1999. The Secretariat should continue exploring the viability of new technology, especially with respect to remote translation and interpretation. The technology must, of course, be fully tested in order to ensure that the quality of the services was not impaired.

11. **Mr. Lozinsky** (Russian Federation) said that his delegation attached great importance to the standards of conference servicing and was grateful to the Committee on Conferences and the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services for their efforts in that connection. It was in general agreement with the conclusions and recommendations of the Committee on Conferences as set out in its report (A/53/32).

12. In particular, it supported the recommendations concerning the draft revised calendar of conferences and the points made in that connection in paragraphs 11 and 12, as well as the conclusions and recommendations contained in paragraphs 20 to 24 concerning improved utilization of conference-servicing resources. There was, however, a need for a rational and pragmatic approach to the assessment of statistics, which must not take precedence over considerations of quality and productivity. For example, the statistics on unused meeting time did not always reflect the effectiveness of the work of the body concerned. The Fifth Committee's practice of switching between formal meetings and informal consultations provided a good example in that connection. On the other hand, the late start of meetings usually meant a waste of time and resources. The Chairman of the Fifth Committee deserved commendation for his efforts in that connection.

13. His delegation endorsed the comments of the Committee on Conferences and ACABQ on the development of a cost-accounting system for conference services, but it drew attention to paragraph 10 of the report of ACABQ (A/53/507), which stated that the report of the Secretary-General (A/53/257) did not provide sufficient information to allow endorsement of the full-fledged development of such a system. It fully supported the recommendation that the Secretary-General's proposals should be refined, taking into account any additional policy guidance from the General Assembly. It agreed with the Committee's recommendations regarding the problem of the late issuance of documents, which remained a subject of deepest concern. There had, in fact, been occasions on which the Fifth Committee had had to alter its programme of work because documents were not available. The resolution on the item must contain concrete measures to solve what had become a chronic problem. Although compliance with the six-week rule was often not possible, it was equally true that non-compliance was not always due to objective reasons. The recommendation in paragraph 80 of the report of the Committee on Conferences that delayed documents should include a footnote explaining the reason for the delay deserved consideration.

14. His delegation intended to continue to monitor the Organization's translation and interpretation problems closely. The Secretariat must continue its efforts to solve the translation problems, giving due attention to the quality of the translation work and using all possible means of producing translations, including recourse to contractual translation. It drew attention to the recommendation in paragraph 117 of the report of the Committee on Conferences that due account should be taken of the return in terms of possible savings and efficiency gains in planning new technology. While the efforts to introduce new technology should be supported, the process must not become an end in itself: it must be monitored in terms of its effectiveness and real returns. The Secretariat should, in particular, continue its work on the optical disk system in the light of the recommendations of the Advisory Committee and the Committee on Conferences.

15. **Ms. Buergo Rodríguez** (Cuba) said that her delegation associated itself fully with the statement made by the representative of Indonesia on behalf of the Group of 77 and China but wished to make some additional comments on points of particular interest to her delegation.

16. It supported the conclusions and recommendations of the Committee on Conferences on the improved utilization of conference-servicing resources and was particularly pleased that the overall utilization rate had exceeded the 80 per cent benchmark in 1997 (A/53/32, para. 20). It noted that in most cases the late start and early adjournment of meetings was not due to irresponsibility or inefficiency. It also supported the conclusions and recommendations in paragraphs 50 and 51 of the report of the Committee on Conferences concerning improved utilization of conference facilities at Nairobi.

17. Her delegation was deeply concerned about the persistent problem of the late issuance of documents and stressed the need for information about the reasons for delays, as requested in resolution 52/214 B. It was particularly regrettable that the six-week rule was still not fully observed; the timely receipt of documents would facilitate consultations in the committees and prevent unnecessary delays. Conference services must be provided with all the resources necessary to resolve the problem, and her delegation would monitor the situation closely during the informal consultations.

18. The abolition of translator and interpreter posts had a direct impact on the quality of the services provided to Member States. The breakdown by language of the abolished posts, mentioned in paragraph 110 of the report, should be made available to the General Assembly. Her delegation supported the conclusions and recommendations in paragraphs 112 to 118, in particular paragraph 115 concerning the preparation of the budget proposals for conference services on the basis of actual anticipated requirements. The question of career prospects in the language services was also a source of concern, and her delegation supported the recommendation for a special report on the problems encountered in that area.

19. It noted with satisfaction the increase in the provision of interpretation services to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States and hoped that the trend would continue.

20. **Mr. Sulaiman** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that the responsibility for ensuring conference services was shared jointly by the Secretariat, the Committee on Conferences and the Member States.

21. Paragraph 22 of the report of the Committee on Conferences (A/53/32) referred to a request that had been made to the Secretariat to carry out a study on the possible relationship between the late issuance of documentation and the low utilization of conference services by some international bodies. It was to be feared that the outcome of such a study might be a reduction in conference services in the United Nations and a consequential lowering of standards.

22. His delegation had taken note of the report of the Secretary-General on interpretation and translation issues (A/53/221) and was concerned at the abolition of 30 translator and interpreter posts referred to in paragraph 13 of section III of General Assembly resolution 52/220 on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1998–1999. In that connection, it was clear from paragraph 108 of the report of the Committee on Conferences that the abolition of the posts had had an impact on translation and interpretation services; that was further confirmed by the fact that the Secretariat had been obliged to use temporary assistance. His delegation endorsed the view expressed in paragraph 110 of the same report that the vacant posts should be filled immediately. The reliance on temporary assistance as a result of the abolition of the 30 posts, and the increased use of such temporary staff, increased the financial burden of the Organization and might adversely affect quality.

23. It was claimed in the report that the reduction in conference services reflected savings made as a result of the use of modern technology. In that connection, his delegation again asked the Secretariat to explain how the use of such technology had an impact on translation.

24. The report did not correctly reflect the relative burden of work in the translation services which was higher in the Arabic, Chinese and Russian services than in the other three services; the former were therefore in greater need of additional translators. His delegation would like the Secretariat to comment on that matter.

25. On the subject of self-revision mentioned in the report of the Secretary-General on interpretation and translation issues (A/53/221), his delegation would like the Secretariat to provide details of the corrective measures that could be taken to ensure the maintenance of high quality in translation referred to in paragraph 10. His delegation considered that self-revision should not be a regular substitute for revision by experienced linguists since, as mentioned in paragraph 11 of the report, "self-revision" was a euphemism for "no revision".

26. Referring to paragraph 14 of the same report, which stated that in the summer of 1998 some 20 members of the translation services in New York had attended courses in France, Jordan, the Russian Federation and Spain, he asked the Secretariat to provide details in writing on the number of translators from each translation service who had attended such courses, and the criteria used for their selection. He welcomed the efforts by the Secretariat to improve academic standards in the interest of all six languages. His delegation also expressed its appreciation to the Arabic translation and interpretation services for their efforts to improve the standard of Arabic as one of the official languages of the Organization.

27. With respect to the provision of services for regional groups, he regretted that 19 per cent of requests for interpretation services had been turned down. Several meetings of the Group of 77 and China on Fifth Committee matters had taken place without interpretation, even though not many meetings were being held at Headquarters at the time. His delegation reminded the Secretariat that such a situation hindered Member States in their negotiations and suggested that it could do more to provide the assistance required.

28. On the subject of the cost-accounting system, his delegation regretted that conference services had been made a scapegoat for the application of that system, which would further limit the utilization of conference services. It would be premature to take a decision on the matter, which should be held over until the preliminary estimates were prepared by the Secretariat as mentioned in paragraph 42 of the report of the Committee on Conferences. His delegation shared the opinion of the Advisory Committee in paragraph 10 of its report (A/53/507) that the purpose and scope of the cost-accounting system needed to be more clearly defined. It concurred with ACABQ in cautioning against an expensive cost-accounting system and agreed that the Secretary-General should address the weaknesses identified by ACABQ in its report.

29. Another subject of concern to his delegation was the increasing use of modern technology, which was often detrimental to the quality of translation and interpretation. One such innovation was remote translation and interpretation which would be likely to lead to the abolition of posts, a trend that would inevitably have a negative impact on the multilingual nature of the Organization. Such reductions would, moreover, be at variance with the emphasis placed by the Secretary-General on the importance of multilingualism in the Organization in his report on that matter (A/52/577).

30. In conclusion, his delegation was pleased to note from paragraph 8 of the report of the Committee on Conferences that the two holidays of Id al-Fitr and Id al-Adha would be observed in future as official holidays at Headquarters and hoped that it would no longer be necessary for delegations to raise that matter.

31. **Mr. Pan Qingjiang** (China) said that his delegation noted that the consolidation of the secretariats of most of the General Assembly and Economic and Social Council bodies had helped to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the work of the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services. It also noted with satisfaction that the utilization of conference-servicing resources in 1997 had been higher than that in 1996. The example set by the Fifth Committee of starting its meetings on time should be followed by other bodies. The early adjournment of meetings was a waste of resources; all bodies should endeavour to plan their work more accurately when requesting meetings and organizing their programmes.

32. Although the Secretariat had made efforts to improve the quality of documents, his delegation continued to find many mistakes in the Chinese documents, including Chinese characters appearing upside down. The Secretariat needed to establish a strict management system, with emphasis on accountability and merit.

33. The late issuance of documents by the Secretariat was all too common. His delegation agreed with the Committee on Conferences that the Secretariat should be asked to submit to it, at its substantive session in 1999, a report containing detailed data on the reasons for delays in the issuance of documentation (A/53/32, para. 79). His delegation believed that that report should also be distributed to all Member States.

34. The quality of interpretation and translation in all official languages must be improved. His delegation understood that the Secretariat had made tremendous efforts in that regard, but in many instances inadequate translation or interpretation had hampered the work of delegations or even disrupted meetings. His delegation was concerned about the impact of the reduction of language staff on conference services; the existing number of Chinese interpreters could only meet basic meeting requirements. When the General Assembly had been in session, or during peak periods, the Secretariat had had to resort to temporary assistance and a very small number of freelance interpreters had not performed satisfactorily. His delegation believed that, in recruiting freelance interpreters and translators, it was necessary to exercise strict quality control. It was also necessary to expand the freelance roster.

35. With regard to the cost-accounting system for conference services, his delegation believed that the question should be approached with caution, and agreed with the assessment of the Advisory Committee in paragraph 10 of its report (A/53/507) that the purpose and scope of the system needed to be more clearly defined, a clearer presentation of related costs was required, and a cost-benefit analysis must be carried out in order to prevent the development of an elaborate system the costs of which might end up outweighing the benefits.

36. **Mr. Kabir** (Bangladesh) said that his delegation noted with satisfaction the improved utilization of conference services in New York, Geneva and Vienna during 1997, as well as the improvement in providing conference services for meetings of regional and other major groupings; however, there was still room for further improvement. His delegation concurred with the recommendation of the Committee on Conferences that the requirements of the regional and other major groupings should be taken into account when the work programme for future conferences was being prepared (A/53/32, para. 32).

37. He shared the concern expressed by many other delegations about the poor quality of some documents and the persistent delays in the issuance of documents. He would like to know to what extent requests from Member States for new documents had increased. It would be helpful if the Secretariat could provide members with a list of requests received and documents produced during the past five years, together with an explanation of the reasons for the delays. If the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services suffered from inadequate resources, that should be spelt out clearly before the Assembly.

38. His delegation was also concerned about the decline in the quality of translation and interpretation. The introduction of new technology and a new management style should not compromise the quality of the services offered. He concurred with the concern expressed by the Committee on Conferences that costs saved by the abolition of posts would be outweighed by the cost of excessive reliance on temporary staff at peak periods, which might be detrimental to quality (A/53/32, para. 111).

39. While his delegation supported maximization of benefit from services, it wished to stress that the value of conference services must not be underestimated. It fully endorsed the idea that the budget for conference services should be prepared on a full-cost basis, with possible efficiency gains identified. The General Assembly could then decide where such gains might be obtained.

40. **Mr. Elmontaser** (Libyan Arab Jamahiriya) said that the discipline that had been observed in starting meetings of the Committee promptly would contribute to the more efficient use of conference services. He appreciated the fact that conference services had met over 81 per cent of the requests for meetings of the regional and other major groupings, and hoped that in future all such meetings would be covered.

41. The continued delay in the issuance of documents was a matter of regret and caused particular problems for small delegations. He drew attention in that connection to the need to respect the provisions of paragraph 20 of General Assembly resolution 52/214 B by adhering to the six-week rule for the distribution of documents.

42. The late issuance of summary records was at variance with paragraphs 12 and 13 of General Assembly resolution 52/214 B and considerably reduced the usefulness of those documents. Moreover, the tendency to summarize too concisely meant that the substance of statements was sometimes not adequately expressed. In that connection, he asked that the actual words used by speakers should appear in the summary records.

43. His delegation had noted that interpretation into Arabic was of very poor quality; the interpreter sometimes stopped interpreting for a short time and omitted several lines or even whole paragraphs of the statements of speakers.

44. Printing errors were also a problem. For example, on 19 October 1998, when the item on the pattern of conferences was due to be discussed in the Committee, the Arabic version of the *Journal* (No. 1998/200) had indicated that the item to be discussed would be programme planning. His delegation had therefore made preparations for the

discussion of that item and was surprised when another item was discussed. There were other mistakes in the *Journal* for 20 October (No. 1998/201) in the listing of meetings of the Group of 77. In addition, the Arabic text of draft resolution A/C.5/53/L.9, relating to the support account for peacekeeping operations, which had been submitted to the Committee at its 10th meeting, indicated that the draft resolution would be submitted under item 142, whereas the correct item was 143.

45. A still more important point was that the use of expressions alien to Arabic made it difficult for the reader to understand the intended meaning. That applied particularly to expressions borrowed from other languages. Translation meant the transfer of meaning from one language to another, and not the transfer of individual words. His delegation urged the Secretariat to restore the function of reviser and to assist the developing States to overcome their difficulties in acquiring new technology and to gain access to the optical disk system and other technologies.

46. In conclusion, he urged the necessity of treating the six official languages of the United Nations equally when issuing documents, resolutions and information papers.

47. **Mr. Park Hae-Yun** (Republic of Korea) said that the establishment of the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services had contributed to enhancing coordination of conference services, thereby increasing the cost-effectiveness and quality of the services.

48. His delegation endorsed the draft revised calendar of conferences and meetings for 1999 recommended by the Committee on Conferences in its report (A/53/32), and agreed with the Committee that every effort should be made to avoid simultaneous peak periods at the various duty stations.

49. He noted with appreciation that the overall utilization factor for 1997 had exceeded the benchmark of 80 per cent; appropriate action should be taken to improve the utilization of conference resources by those bodies which had fallen below the applicable benchmark. The Chairman of the Committee on Conferences should continue to consult with the chairmen of bodies that had consistently failed to meet the applicable benchmark figure.

50. His delegation attached great importance to the development of a more accurate and efficient cost-accounting system for conference services. The report of the Secretary-General (A/53/257) provided useful information on the matter. His delegation shared the view of the Committee on Conferences that the experience of all duty stations should be taken into consideration when improvements were made in existing information systems (A/53/32, para. 41), and hoped that the Secretariat would provide further information, in particular preliminary estimates of the expenditures required to establish a permanent system and a time-frame for each phase of the project.

51. His delegation welcomed the decision of the Secretary-General to limit the length of documents originating in the Secretariat to 16 pages, and hoped that all intergovernmental bodies would reduce the length of their reports from 32 to 20 pages. Every effort should be made to prevent frequent waivers of the 16-page rule and to maintain high standards of quality in the process of seeking efficient use of resources.

52. *Mr. Abelian (Armenia) resumed the Chair.*

53. **Mr. Namburete** (Mozambique) commended the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services for its efforts in redesigning its working methods in order to make use of the potential offered by state-of-the-art technologies. He welcomed efforts to service an intergovernmental body meeting in Geneva with interpreters stationed in Vienna, as well as the Department's efforts to make similar arrangements between United Nations offices in Vienna and Nairobi. The need to deploy staff interpreters from other duty stations would be minimized, thus allowing for more meetings to convene at the United Nations office in Africa.

54. He noted with satisfaction that the overall utilization factor of conference-related services for 1997 exceeded the benchmark of 80 per cent, and was even higher in Geneva and Vienna. He noted with concern, however, that the same level of utilization had not been achieved in Nairobi, despite significant improvements in comparison to the period between 1996 and 1997. He therefore encouraged the Secretariat to spare no effort to improve the utilization rate at that duty station.

55. His delegation also noted with concern that a number of bodies had utilized their resources at levels lower than the benchmark level. In that regard, the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences should engage in a consultative dialogue with the chairmen of those bodies, with a view to finding ways and means to maximize the utilization of conference-servicing resources allocated to them.

56. Another area of concern to his delegation was that of non-compliance with the six-week rule for the issuance of documents and the poor quality of some documents. Given the international character of the United Nations, equal treatment should be given to all official languages in terms

of timely issuance and high quality of conference documents. The suspension of some publications in all languages and the current levels of self-revision were also matters of serious concern.

57. His delegation took note of the arguments presented by the Secretariat with regard to the abolition of 30 interpreter and translator posts, and would like to underscore the need to preserve and improve the quality of conference services. It was not clear how the abolition of posts could result in increased productivity and higher levels of efficiency.

58. He shared the view that the efficient functioning of conference services required an adequate cost-accounting system, and understood the complexity of such an endeavour. An activity-based cost-accounting system seemed to be an appropriate approach to the reality of conference services in the Organization. However, further information was needed for the full implementation of such a system. His delegation encouraged the Secretariat to provide preliminary estimates of the expenditures involved in each stage of development of the system, as well as a time-frame for the completion of each phase.

59. **Mr. Ogutu** (Kenya) said that, in line with the ongoing reform measures instituted by the Secretary-General with a view to ensuring efficient use of resources, it was imperative for the Organization to ensure optimal and rational use of the existing facilities within the system. As host of the only United Nations centre in the developing world, his delegation was concerned that the facilities at the Nairobi offices continued to be underutilized. In that regard, it was grateful to the Secretary-General for the various measures he had taken to improve the situation in line with General Assembly resolution 52/214 A. His delegation supported the appeal by the Committee on Conferences, which urged Member States, intergovernmental bodies and regional and other major groupings to consider increasing their use of the facilities at Nairobi (A/53/32, para. 51). In particular, meetings relating to environmental and human settlement matters should, to the extent possible, be held in Nairobi, where the respective principal bodies of the United Nations were located.

60. His delegation had taken note of the efforts made by the Secretary-General to enhance global coordination through the introduction of new communication technologies. It concurred with the views expressed by the Group of 77 and China that the use of remote interpretation must be confined to international conferences on an experimental basis and should not in any way lead to budget reductions affecting conference services at United Nations offices. Efforts by the Secretariat to fill vacancies in the language services at all duty stations should be sustained.

61. In conclusion, he said his delegation hoped that measures would be put in place to ensure that the utilization of facilities in Nairobi reached the benchmark level which had already been attained by the other United Nations centres. In that connection, his delegation wished to highlight the concerns expressed by the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme regarding the large discrepancy in funding from the United Nations regular budget to the office in Nairobi as compared to the offices in Vienna and Geneva.

62. **Mr. Orr** (Canada) said he noted that the report of the Secretary-General on the cost-accounting system for conference services(A/53/257) discussed cost-accounting systems based on whether an organization was a profit-making or a not-for-profit enterprise. Referring to the statement in that report that it was difficult to measure outputs in not-for-profit organizations because many of the costs were fixed, he said that his delegation questioned the difficulties in measuring such outputs, especially where the essential activities were document production and meeting servicing.

63. A cost-accounting system allowed for management to focus on outcomes and results rather than on inputs. It was a tool to help management to make decisions on the allocation of resources. Such systems were found throughout all types of organizations, including not-for-profit and governmental organizations. Within governmental organizations, the first areas that adopted cost-accounting systems were those that had activities such as document production. Managers found the information invaluable in making decisions on the production quality used for documents. His delegation would be interested in knowing how the Secretariat made those types of decisions in the absence of a cost-accounting system.

64. His delegation supported the observations of the Advisory Committee made in its report on interpretation and translation issues (A/53/507) to the effect that an elaborate and expensive cost-accounting system was not required to meet management needs, and it looked forward to the next report of the Secretary-General on the experience with the prototype system.

65. **Mr. Darwish** (Egypt) said that his delegation supported the recommendation of the Committee on Conferences concerning the adoption of the calendar of conferences and meetings for 1999, which was in accordance with the actual requirements of the United Nations thanks to continuing cooperation between the Committee on

Conferences and the Secretariat, and it welcomed the fact that the utilization of conference services had exceeded the benchmark of 80 per cent.

66. With reference to paragraph 2 of the report of the Secretary-General on interpretation and translation issues (A/53/221), he was concerned that the majority of the posts abolished were in documents processing and he hoped that that would not adversely affect performance or efficiency. He noted the late issuance of documents in certain languages, particularly Arabic, and reaffirmed the importance of issuing documents in all languages simultaneously or within a short period of time.

67. Referring to paragraphs 4 and 5 of the same report, concerning the abolition of 30 translator and interpreter posts in the programme budget for the biennium 1998–1999, he said that his delegation was categorically opposed to any reductions in the area of Arabic translation and interpretation. It was important to make efforts to raise standards in that area and to keep the present number of translators and interpreters.

68. With reference to paragraphs 11 and 12 of the same report, he said that his delegation had noted the increase in the rate of self-revision, particularly in Geneva and Vienna. It was important to avoid any adverse effect that might result from that trend, to improve the standards of revisers and to keep to the level of 45 per cent for self-revision as specified by the Advisory Committee in 1980.

69. With reference to the cost-accounting system, his delegation shared the view of the Advisory Committee expressed in paragraph 10 of its report (A/53/507), which emphasized the importance of clarifying the purpose and scope of such a system and called on the Secretary-General to resubmit his proposals on the matter in a clearer and simpler report so that an early decision could be taken.

70. On the subject of access to the optical disk system, his delegation was pleased to note from paragraph 5 of the report of the Secretary-General (A/52/803) that access to the system had been made available to permanent and observer missions through the Internet in November 1996. He hoped that progress in that innovative project would keep pace with the continuing advances in that area. He supported the statement in paragraph 8 of the report about allowing access to other categories of users through the payment of subscriptions.

71. He stressed the importance of adhering to the six-week rule for the submission of documents in order to give delegations time to study them and to take informed decisions on them.

72. His delegation noted with satisfaction the statement in paragraph 8 of the report of the Committee on Conferences (A/53/32) that the two holidays of Id al-Fitr and Id al-Adha would be observed as holidays on 18 January and 29 March 1999, respectively. It also noted the recommendation in paragraph 11 of the report that meetings should not be held in the United Nations on 9 April 1999, the date of the Orthodox Easter, and the statement that those arrangements should be taken into account when future calendars of conferences and meetings were drafted.

73. In conclusion, he said that his delegation considered it necessary to provide conference services to regional meetings in the United Nations since such meetings complemented and facilitated the work of official meetings.

74. **Mr. Wharton** (United States) said his delegation was pleased to note that the overall utilization factor for conference services in 1997 had exceeded the benchmark of 80 per cent, and that improvements had been made in the utilization factor at Nairobi. It was also pleased that the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences had contacted the chairmen of the bodies whose utilization factor had been lower than 80 per cent in order to improve their utilization of conference services, and it encouraged further efforts by the Secretariat and the Committee in that regard.

75. His delegation believed that an effective cost-accounting system would be a significant management tool for the Secretariat, and encouraged it to continue its efforts in that regard. His delegation also appreciated the Secretariat's efforts to improve the control and limitation of documentation, to address the continuing problem of the late issuance of documents and improve language services, and to include the introduction of new technologies. He encouraged further efforts on those important issues.

76. His delegation joined others in welcoming the Secretary-General's decision that all documents originating in the Secretariat should not exceed 16 pages, and the invitation to intergovernmental bodies to consider reducing their reports over a period of time to a maximum of 20 pages. He noted that, while the majority of Secretariat documents met the new limits, those which exceeded the limits accounted for the majority of the translation workload relating to Secretariat documents, and that non-Secretariat documents which exceeded even the current limit of 32 pages accounted for a significant amount of the overall translation workload (A/53/32, para. 96). Further efforts were needed in that regard.

77. His delegation would like to ask the Secretariat about the level of conference-services support which was given to non-governmental organizations. It would like to know what

type of such support was provided, whether translation was provided as well as production and distribution of documents originated by non-governmental organizations, and the estimated annual cost of such support. The reply could be given during informal consultations.

78. **Mr. Odaga-Jalomayo** (Uganda) said that his delegation's views on the item under consideration had been eloquently expressed by the representative of Indonesia, speaking on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. His delegation also supported the statement made by the representative of Kenya.

79. **Mr. Sulaiman** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that his delegation endorsed paragraph 11 of the report of the Committee on Conferences (A/53/32), which recommended that United Nations bodies should be invited to avoid holding meetings on 9 April 1999, the date of the Orthodox Church Easter, which was celebrated in his country. He hoped that the Orthodox Easter would be taken into account in the preparation of future calendars of conferences.

80. **The Chairman** announced that he had received a letter from the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences informing him that, during its resumed session in 1997, the Fifth Committee had utilized only 77 per cent of its allocated conference resources and had lost 27 hours and 25 minutes.

81. **Mr. Sulaiman** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that, while he understood that the Secretariat would reply to questions in the informal consultations, he would like to ask it to provide its answers in writing.

Agenda item 125: Financing of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (*continued*) (A/C.5/53/L.12)

82. **Ms. Duschner** (Canada), introducing draft resolution A/C.5/53/L.12, which she was submitting on behalf of the Chairman, said that it had been approved by consensus during informal consultations. She recommended it to the Committee for adoption.

83. Draft resolution A/C.5/53/L.12 was adopted.

Agenda item 136: Financing of the United Nations Mission of Observers in Tajikistan *(continued)* (A/C.5/53/L.10)

84. **The Chairman** introduced draft resolution A/C.5/53/L.10, which he was submitting following informal consultations.

85. *Draft resolution A/C.5/53/L.10 was adopted.*

Agenda item 140: Financing of the United Nations Preventive Deployment Force (*continued*) (A/C.5/53/L.11)

86. **The Chairman** introduced draft resolution A/C.5/53/L.11, which he was submitting following informal consultations.

87. *Draft resolution A/C.5/53/L.11 was adopted.*

Agenda item 114: Programme planning (*continued*) (A/53/16)

88. **Mr. Odaga-Jalomayo** (Uganda) said that the informal consultations on the item concerning programme planning were proceeding well, with some 60 or 70 per cent of the content of the draft resolution already agreed. However, information was still awaited from the Secretariat on some of the questions raised during the discussions, in particular with regard to programme performance.

89. The attention of participants in the consultations had been drawn to paragraph 40 of the report of the Committee for Programme and Coordination (A/53/16), where it was noted that the proposed revisions to programmes 1, 3, 13, 18, 20, 24, 26 and 28 had not been submitted to the sectoral and regional bodies for their consideration. That unfortunate situation persisted despite having been addressed in resolution 51/219.

90. Notwithstanding that problem, delegations had shown great flexibility in agreeing to continue the negotiations on the proposed revisions. He had, however, been asked to request the Chairman of the Fifth Committee to write to the Chairmen of the Main Committees concerned requesting them to state their positions on the proposed revisions to the programmes which he had just mentioned. The letter might also contain a deadline for replies. He was sure that on receipt of the replies an early decision could be taken in the informal consultations.

91. **The Chairman** thanked the representative of Uganda for his statement and for his efforts to achieve consensus. He asked whether the Committee wished to advise him to address a letter to the Chairmen of the other Main Committees requesting their comments on the relevant proposed revisions to the medium-term plan that had not been submitted to the attention of sectoral and regional bodies. He asked for guidance as to the deadline he should request for the receipt of their comments.

92. **Mr. Darwish** (Egypt) said that his delegation supported the referral of those proposed revisions concerned to the other Main Committees and suggested that a deadline of at least two weeks should be specified. He further

suggested that additional information might be sought, if necessary, from Geneva.

93. **Ms. Buergo Rodríguez** (Cuba) agreed that the Chairman should contact the Chairmen of the other Main Committees requesting their comments and was in favour of the deadline of two weeks suggested by the representative of Egypt. That would enable the Fifth Committee to take its decision on the agenda without undue further delay.

94. **The Chairman** said that, if the deadline was to be two weeks, as proposed by the representatives of Egypt and Cuba, the date for receipt of comments from the Chairmen of the other Main Committees would be Friday, 6 November 1998. He also pointed out that there would be no need for him to write a letter concerning programme 24 since that was an item being considered by the Fifth Committee. He therefore suggested that he should write to the Chairmen of the other Main Committees requesting their comments and specifying a deadline of two weeks.

95. *It was so decided.*

Agenda item 118: Scale of assessments for the apportionment of the expenses of the United Nations (A/C.5/53/28)

96. **The Chairman** drew attention to a letter addressed to him by the President of the General Assembly regarding a request for exemption from the application of Article 19 of the Charter submitted by the Permanent Representative of Iraq to the United Nations (A/C.5/53/28).

97. **Mr. Ayoub** (Iraq) said that, as a founding Member of the United Nations, his country had always made a point of paying its contributions regularly and in full but that, since 1993, it had been obliged by exceptional circumstances to stop making payments, and as a result it had lost the right to vote in 1995 through the application of Article 19 of the Charter.

98. The previous attempts by his country to pay its contributions out of its frozen assets had been rejected on account of certain members of the Security Council Committee established by resolution 661 (1990) concerning the situation between Iraq and Kuwait. In 1995, his country had also requested a waiver of the application of Article 19, pending the total or partial lifting of the sanctions imposed on it, on the grounds that it was unable to pay for reasons beyond its control. However, a small number of States had prevented that request from being granted, as indicated in paragraph 66 of the report of the Committee on Contributions (A/50/11).

99. In conclusion, his delegation called on the Committee to take a favourable decision on its request in the interests of justice and equality between Member States, particularly since the General Assembly had been able to overlook certain procedural matters related to the granting of exemptions from the application of Article 19 to other States.

100. **Mr. Monayair** (Kuwait), supported by **Mr. Salim** (Saudi Arabia), said that the economic circumstances which had made it possible to exempt certain other States from the application of Article 19 were entirely different from the circumstances pertaining to Iraq, since the circumstances of the former had indeed been beyond their control. The economic conditions being faced by Iraq resulted from the fact that it had failed to implement any of the resolutions of the Security Council. The request of Iraq should therefore be rejected and its case should be addressed separately.

101. **Mr. Elmontaser** (Libyan Arab Jamahiriya), supported by **Mr. Abdelwahid** (Sudan), noted from the report of the Committee on Contributions (A/53/11) that, in June 1998, Article 19 had been due to be applied to some 23 States which had experienced economic crises as a result of wars or shortage of resources, pending payment of the minimum arrears of contributions that would entitle them to vote. The statements by representatives of Arab States, on the one hand, and the waivers of the application of Article 19 of the Charter granted by the Committee in more than one form to certain States, on the other, put his delegation in a dilemma as to whether Iraq's request should be supported or rejected. His delegation did not wish to enter into political issues or matters of controversy and therefore supported the request of Iraq, as it had previously done in the case of certain States, particularly since what was involved was a purely technical issue. His delegation hoped that the representatives of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia would regard the request in the same light.

102. **Ms. Buergo Rodríguez** (Cuba) said that her delegation supported the request of Iraq for an exemption to the application of Article 19 of the Charter. On the basis of a decision taken by the Committee a few days previously, it was engaged in a process of consultation on the application of Article 19; on that basis, it should be consistent and not deal with requests on a selective and discriminatory basis. The decisions by the Committee should be taken after consideration of the report of the Committee on Contributions which was due to be submitted the following week.

103. **Mr. Repasch** (United States of America) said that the statements made by the representatives of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia showed that Iraq's request differed from previous

requests. Accordingly, his delegation supported the statements made by those representatives.

104. **Mr. Ayoub** (Iraq) said that his delegation strongly denied the statements concerning its failure to implement the resolutions of the Security Council. The subject of contributions had no connection with those resolutions, none of which contained any provisions on the matter or on the loss by his country of the right to vote.

105. **Mr. Sulaiman** (Syrian Arab Republic) supported the statement made by the representative of the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya and requested that the matter should be considered from the technical and not from the political standpoint. As a matter of principle, his delegation supported the request of any State for a waiver of the application of Article 19, and, on that basis, it supported the request by Iraq.

106. **Mr. Darwish** (Egypt) said that the matter was sensitive and that he endorsed the statements made by the representatives of the Syrian Arab Republic and the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. He suggested that the request from Iraq be considered at informal meetings or during consideration of the report of the Committee on Contributions the following week.

107. **Mr. Ayoub** (Iraq) supported the statement made by the representative of Egypt.

108. **The Chairman** said that the Committee was due to resume consultations on two earlier requests, from Bosnia and Herzegovina and from the Congo, and noted the suggestion made by the representative of Egypt. He invited the representative of Ireland, in his capacity as coordinator of the informal consultations on item 118, to inform the Committee concerning the progress of the informal consultations.

109. **Mr. Smyth** (Ireland) said that no consensus had emerged during informal consultations earlier in the week on the requests by Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Congo, in which over 40 delegations had spoken. Both the delegations concerned had indicated to him that they wished to hear the advice of the Chairman of the Committee on Contributions the following week as to how their cases might be taken forward.

110. **Ms. Topić** (Bosnia and Herzegovina) confirmed that her delegation wished to receive the advice of the Chairman of the Committee on Contributions as to how to proceed. Her delegation strongly supported those representatives who had expressed the view in the informal consultations that the requests should be considered separately, and she thanked those who had supported the request by her country.

111. **Mr. Gotienne** (Congo) said it was essential that each request should be considered separately in informal consultations. His delegation looked forward to the presence of the Chairman of the Committee on Contributions the following week whose advice would assist the Fifth Committee in taking a decision on the matter.

112. **Mr. Yusuf Mshamba** (United Republic of Tanzania) agreed with the representative of Egypt that the requests should be considered in informal consultations and added that, in the opinion of his delegation, it was important to consider them individually and not as a package.

113. **The Chairman** said that the Committee was clearly in favour of considering the three requests in informal consultations and asked whether the Committee wished to begin those consultations immediately.

114. **Mr. Darwish** (Egypt) said that his delegation was not in favour of holding informal consultations immediately, particularly as the two delegations which had submitted their requests over a week earlier had both indicated that they wished to have the advice of the Chairman of the Committee on Contributions.

115. **Mr. Pan Qingjiang** (China), noting that the representatives of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Congo wished to have the advice of the Chairman of the Committee on Contributions, said that it would be preferable to postpone the informal consultations until the following week.

116. **Mr. Atiyanto** (Indonesia) agreed with the representatives of Egypt and China.

117. **The Chairman** suggested that informal consultations on agenda item 118 should be held on the following Monday afternoon in the presence of the Chairman of the Committee on Contributions and that the outcome of that informal meeting, and of any other informal consultations that might be scheduled, would be taken up by the Committee on the following Wednesday morning under agenda item 118.

118. *It was so decided.*

Other matters

119. **The Chairman** said that he had received a communication from the President of the Coordinating Committee for International Staff Unions and Associations of the United Nations System (CCISUA) and the President of the Federation of International Civil Servants' Associations (FICSA) requesting access to address the Committee at the current session. In accordance with General Assembly resolution 35/213, and in keeping with the practice of the Committee at previous sessions of the

General Assembly, he took it that the Committee wished to invite the representative of FICSA and the representative of CCISUA to make an oral statement in connection with agenda items 119 and 120.

120. *It was so decided.*

121. **The Chairman** said that that afternoon the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resources Management would hold a special briefing for interested delegations on the report of the Secretary-General on human resources management reform (A/53/414).

122. **Ms. Buergo Rodríguez** (Cuba) said that her delegation was concerned about the increasing tendency of the Secretariat to arrange informal briefings on reports of the Secretary-General such as the one to which the Chairman had just referred. Her delegation considered that such reports should be discussed in the context of the Committee's general debate and that the practice of holding informal briefings was open to objection.

123. **The Chairman** pointed out that such informal briefings were intended only to give interested delegations the opportunity to exchange views and did not, in any way, prevent the subject matter from being fully discussed in the Committee.

124. **Ms. Incera** (Costa Rica) said that her delegation shared the concerns expressed by the representative of Cuba and felt that the formal meetings of the Committee were the proper forum for such exchanges of view.

125. **Mr. Atiyanto** (Indonesia) said that he had noted the comments made by the representatives of Cuba and Costa Rica, but felt that, without prejudice to the general debate in the Committee, such briefings could serve a useful purpose in the case of a complex report. They should, however, only be held when there appeared to be a real need for them.

126. **The Chairman** said that the briefing had been requested by a number of delegations but that, if the Committee so wished, it could be cancelled.

127. **Mr. Sulaiman** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that, while his delegation, like those of Cuba, Costa Rica and Indonesia, was not, in principle, strongly in favour of the practice of arranging briefings on the fringe of formal meetings of the Committee, it was not in favour of cancelling the briefing that was scheduled for that afternoon.

128. **Ms. Buergo Rodríguez** (Cuba) said that the purpose of her original statement had been to draw attention to the question of principle raised by informal briefings, and not to request the cancellation of the briefing scheduled for that afternoon.

129. **Ms. Incera** (Costa Rica) agreed with the representative of Cuba. Her delegation had not intended to suggest that the briefing should be cancelled, but rather that the question of principle which was raised should be borne in mind for the future.

130. **The Chairman** said he took it that the Committee wished the briefing scheduled for that afternoon to take place.

131. *It was so decided.*

132. **Mr. Darwish** (Egypt) said that on arriving by car at the United Nations building that morning, he had been prevented for over five minutes from entering the garage by the presence of a truck that was blocking the entrance and had to be searched. He had an urgent meeting with his Ambassador and had sounded his horn to indicate that he was in a hurry. One of the guards had responded in an extremely unprofessional manner, telling him to wait, asking for his identity card (which he had kept) and saying that he did not care about his urgent meeting.

133. Such behaviour was unacceptable, and would certainly not be tolerated by his delegation. He asked what were the criteria for selecting security officers of the United Nations, whether they underwent any tests prior to recruitment and, if so, whether such tests included an awareness of the importance of public relations and psychological tests.

134. In his long experience of the United Nations he had always found the security staff to be very professional and courteous. The conduct of the guard that morning was therefore an exception to the rule and he asked that he be assigned to other duties that did not bring him into contact with delegates.

135. **Ms. Buergo Rodríguez** (Cuba) said that the use of entrances to the United Nations by service vehicles caused delays to members of delegations who wished to enter the premises, particularly at peak times, and that measures should be taken to address that matter.

136. **Ms. Incera** (Costa Rica) said that, like the representative of Egypt, she had arrived early that morning but had been unable to enter the premises because the entrance was blocked by a truck. On a related matter, she wished to know on what authority the Secretariat had put up a notice at the 45th Street entrance saying that it was reserved for delegates only.

137. **The Chairman** said that note had been taken of the statements made on matters related to security, which would be conveyed to the Chief of the Security and Safety Service who would provide a response in due course.

The meeting rose at 12.55 p.m.